



# Gender, Race and Ethnicity, and Inequality Research in the *American Economic Review* and the American Economic Association's Conference Papers

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

In recent years the public discourse in the United States has put increasing emphasis on issues related to gender, race and ethnicity, and inequality. Have economists also increased their emphasis on these issues? Some economists have written in popular venues that economic research does not focus on these topics enough (Adams 2019; Francis and Opoku-Agyeman 2020; Steinbaum 2017).

In this paper, we provide evidence that economists have increased their focus on the areas of gender, race and ethnicity, and inequality. We examine two major outlets for economics research, publications in the *American Economic Review* (*AER*) and the conference papers of the American Economic Association annual meeting. We find that economists have placed additional emphasis on these three issues, whether taken as a whole or separately. These trends show up for both the *AER* published articles as well as the conference papers. For the period from 1991 to the present, the trend is clearest for published articles and conference papers addressing gender issues, but the trend is also evident for race/ethnicity and inequality when considering the totality of published articles and conference

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papers. *AER* articles on these topics have increased from about 4 percent to 11 percent of the total published articles, and AEA conference papers have increased from under 10 percent to over 20 percent of the total papers included in the published papers and proceedings of the conference.

The 21st century has provided the economics profession with many new topics to consider. These include: outsourcing; supply chain complexity; the issues that the financial crisis of 2008 raised with respect to bank regulation, housing finance, and ‘shadow banking;’ the structure, conduct, and performance of Internet businesses and the policy issues that have arisen; the role of China in the world economy; the rise of artificial intelligence; the opportunities and challenges posed by ‘big data;’ the rise of intangible capital and the increased importance of intellectual property; and changes in U.S. economic geography, with some major cities generating an increased share of income.

With all of these new topics, as well as continued interest in perennial topics in monetary policy, fiscal policy, public finance, economic history, econometric methods, productivity and growth, economic development, and so on, for *any* topic to have gained market share, as gender, race, and inequality have, is striking. The opportunity cost of an increasing emphasis on these issues means that other areas are given lower priority.

Of course, the question of what is the appropriate level of attention that the profession should give to gender, race, and inequality is a matter of opinion. In this case, opinions are likely to depend on one’s position along the ideological spectrum. The increasing attention placed on these topics could reflect the left-leaning domination of academic economics in the United States (Langbert 2020; 2018; Langbert et al. 2016). But our goal is to provide anyone interested in this topic, regardless of their ideology, with a factual basis for discussion.

The American Economic Association (AEA) is the largest membership organization for academic and professional economists in the United States. Its flagship journal, the *American Economic Review*, is considered one of the ‘top 5’ journals in the field. The AEA’s annual meeting is the largest conference for academic economists in the United States. Papers and proceedings from the conference are published annually, which until 2018 had been published as an issue of the *American Economic Review* and are now published in a standalone journal. These papers are not peer-reviewed.

By studying the AEA conference proceedings and the *AER* journal, we are able to view two different sets of decisionmakers in the publishing of economic research. The conference proceedings are chosen by the President-elect along with members of the Program Committee, which the President-elect chooses. The publications in the *AER* represent the outcome of the collaborative process of editor, co-editors, and referees of the journal.

In the Discussion section below, we treat recent discourse by economists in non-academic outlets such as *Newsweek*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Review*, and the Stigler Center (University of Chicago) publication *ProMarket* about the attention given to these issues in economics.

## Our method for coding articles

To find articles related to the issues of gender, race and ethnicity, and inequality, we started by performing an EconLit search for JEL codes that may contain articles on these topics. JEL codes included J15 (for race and ethnicity), J16 (for gender), J71 (sometimes covering gender or race/ethnicity), and a set of three JEL codes for inequality: J31, D31, and D63. After identifying all the papers tagged with relevant JEL codes, we read each paper to see if the paper was correctly assigned for the JEL code, since some of these (especially on inequality) will produce false positives. Our results begin in 1991, the first full year that the *AER* began using the current JEL code system for editor-assigned JEL codes.<sup>3</sup>

For papers on gender, in our search we were looking for papers that address issues where there are major differences between genders, where policy might have a disparate impact on one gender, or examining issues specific to one gender.

For papers on race and ethnicity, our approach is similar to papers on gender, but we excluded several categories of papers that appear under JEL code J15: papers specifically on discrimination against religious groups, castes, or immigrants. Immigration papers also addressing ethnicity were included. While these are all important topics, we view them as distinct from race and ethnicity issues. We do include papers on Native Americans as falling under race and ethnicity.

For papers on inequality, the JEL codes were so broad that we excluded over half of the papers. For inequality, we are interested in economic inequality of various kinds, including income, wealth, wage, and consumption inequality, as well as papers on factors that may be causes of these forms of inequality (e.g., skill-biased technological change). We also included papers that focused on individuals who earn high incomes, such as the top 1 percent of earners or CEOs. No single JEL code encompasses all of these issues, thus using several JEL codes and then narrowing down the papers was the most appropriate path. We did not include papers on other kinds of inequality, such as health or education inequality (these

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3. The JEL code system underwent a significant revision in 1988–1990 (Cherrier 2017) and began using this system for editor-assigned JEL codes in 1991. From 1990–2008, the *AER* had both editor-assigned and author-assigned JEL codes, which did not always match (Kosnik 2018), but this practice was discontinued in 2009. Because the editor-assigned JEL codes are searchable through EconLit on ProQuest, and these begin in 1991, we chose this date for the beginning of our search.

areas have their own JEL codes, but also some came up under the codes we searched for).

Many papers address multiple topics, and we used our judgment to determine whether gender, race and ethnicity, or inequality was an issue that was addressed in a particular paper. For example, just including a gender variable in a regression was not enough for us to count the paper as one focusing on gender issues. But if the gender outcome was emphasized in the abstract, introduction, or conclusion of the paper, we likely did include it in our count, even if the paper was not primarily about gender issues. The same goes from the other areas we examined. In other words, our default was to include an article or paper that was tagged with one of these JEL codes, unless by reading the article or paper it was clear that our topics of interest were not a major focus in the paper. We provide a list of all the articles and papers we counted in an online appendix ([link](#)).

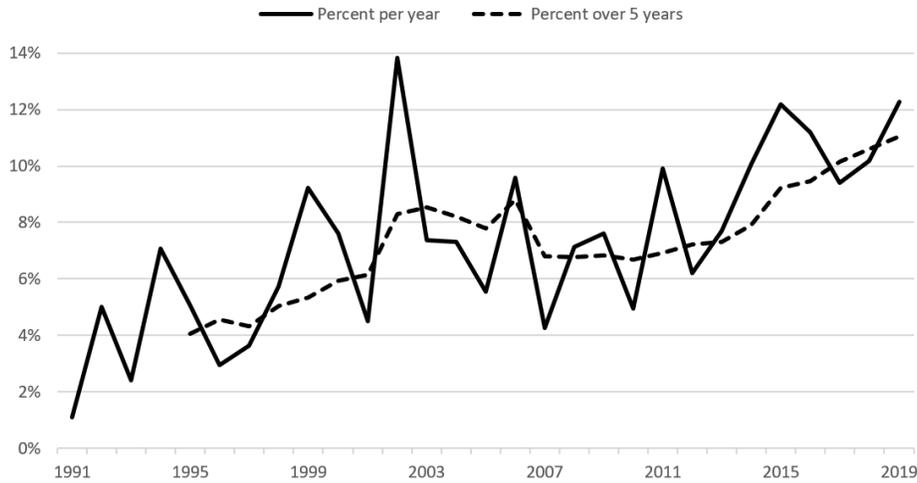
We excluded comments, replies, rejoinders, corrigenda, and errata from our count of articles.

### Articles in the *American Economic Review*

Between 1991 and 2019,<sup>4</sup> we identified 209 articles in the *American Economic Review* that addressed gender, race and ethnicity, or inequality. Some articles addressed two or all three areas, e.g., a paper on the gender wage gap addressed both gender and inequality. We excluded the AEA conference papers in these numbers, which until 2018 were published in the May issue of the *AER*; in 2018 a new standalone journal was established. The AEA conference papers are discussed in the next section. There were 73 articles that addressed gender issues, 56 articles that address race and ethnicity, and 103 articles that addressed inequality. These numbers add up to more than the 209 total articles, because some articles address more than one of the issues. These 209 articles represent 7.6 percent of the 2,747 articles published in the *AER* during this time frame, but there is considerable variation over time. Looking at the percent of articles published over time, we see that the number of articles on these topics has increased as a percent of all articles in the *AER*. This trend is visible in Figure 1, especially when using a five-year smoothing of papers.

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4. We did not include any 2020 articles from the *AER*, since the full year was not available at the time of writing.

**Figure 1.** *American Economic Review* articles on gender, race and ethnicity, and inequality

In the first five years we examined, 1991 to 1995, only about 4 percent of articles were on these topics. From 2015 to 2019 about 11 percent of articles were on these topics. And because the total number of articles published in the *AER* has increased over time, the total number of articles on these topics has increased even more substantially, from just 17 articles in the first five years of our study to 63 articles in the most recent full five years.

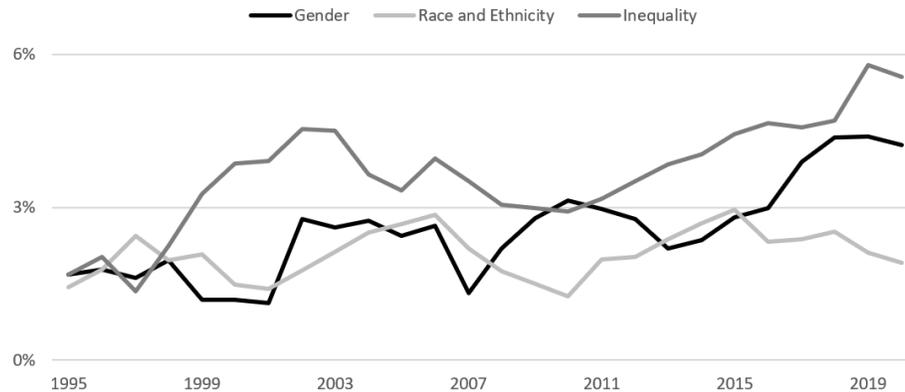
Figure 2 shows the numbers for each of the three areas. Articles addressing gender have increased from under 2 percent in the first five years to over 4 percent in recent years. Articles on race and ethnicity are the only area to show no clear upward trend over time. However, if we look at the absolute number of articles on race and ethnicity, they have doubled from an average of 6 articles between 1991 and 1995 to an average of 12 articles between 2015 and 2019. Articles on inequality increased the most, from under 2 percent in the early years to almost 6 percent in recent years, using a five-year average.

One possibility for the changes in the coverage of topics is due to changes in the editors of the *AER*. To a large extent, the choices of the editors can influence what articles are ultimately published in a journal. The editors for the *AER* over the period we examined were Orley Ashenfelter (1985–2001), Ben S. Bernanke (2001–2004), Robert A. Moffitt (2004–2010), Pinelopi K. Goldberg (2011–2016), and Esther Dufló (2017–present). We cannot with any certainty say how these editors may have influenced the selection of articles, but the trends we highlight have been present over the entire period we studied.

Another possibility to consider is that the AEA introduced four new journals in 2009, covering applied economics, economic policy, macroeconomics, and

microeconomics. It is difficult to say whether these new journals had any influence on the topics covered in the *AER*. However, there is no clear break in the trends around 2009. Of the overall increase from 4 percent to 11 percent in Figure 1, over half of it had taken place by the mid-2000s. The number of articles published in the *AER* continued to increase after 2009 as well, from about 90 per year in the years immediately preceding 2009, to over 110 per year in recent years.

**Figure 2.** *American Economic Review* articles addressing gender, race and ethnicity, or inequality (5-year average)



### *AEA Papers and Proceedings*

The selected conference proceedings should not be seen as a representative sample of what was presented at the conference, since the papers selected for publication are chosen by the President-Elect of the AEA and the Program Committee. The papers presented are only a fraction of the total number presented. For example, at the 2020 conference there were 703 papers on the program, but only 114 papers (16.2 percent) were included in the *AEA Papers and Proceedings*. So the papers tell us about what the leadership of the AEA believed was important to highlight from the conference. Furthermore, it is important to note that these papers are typically chosen for inclusion in the proceedings by full sessions, rather than individual papers. Conference sessions are organized by topic.

Here is how the AEA's website describes the selection of papers to be included in the *AEA Papers and Proceedings*:

the President-elect chooses, at the time of organizing the annual meeting, a number of sessions to be printed in the *AEA Papers and Proceedings*. Due to

space limitations, the number of included sessions is strictly limited. Usually, each member of the Program Committee invites a session of three papers that is included in the AEA Papers and Proceedings. By Executive Committee decision, the President-Elect chooses at least 12 additional submitted papers for the AEA Papers and Proceedings. Eighteen papers included in the AEA Papers and Proceedings are selected by AEA Committees. (American Economic Association 2020)

Figure 3 shows the share of papers on gender, race and ethnicity, and inequality in the *Papers and Proceedings* of the American Economic Association’s annual meetings. From 1991 to 1995, less than 10 percent of the selected conference papers addressed these areas, while in recent years it more than doubled to over 20 percent are on these issues. Most of that increase has occurred since 2012, with five of the last eight years being over 20 percent, and one of those years over 28 percent. There were 414 conference papers on gender, race and ethnicity, and inequality, or about 14.6 percent of the 2,846 conference papers published in the AEA journals from 1991 through 2020. There were 207 conference papers on gender, 135 on race and ethnicity, and 131 on inequality during the years we studied.

**Figure 3.** Conference papers published in the AEA Papers and Proceedings on gender, race and ethnicity, and inequality

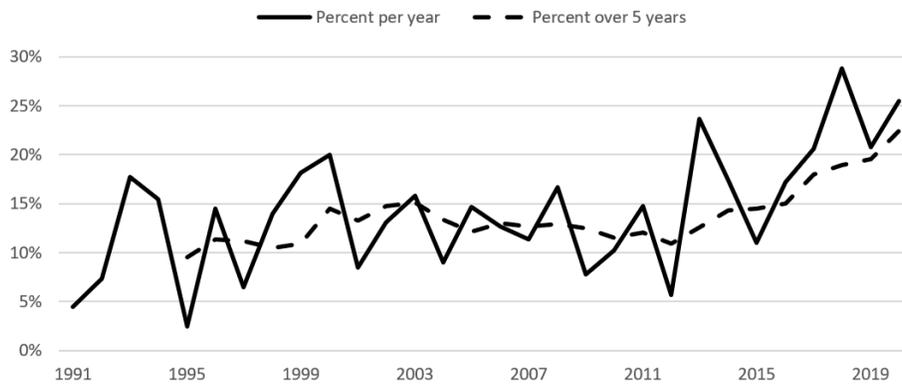
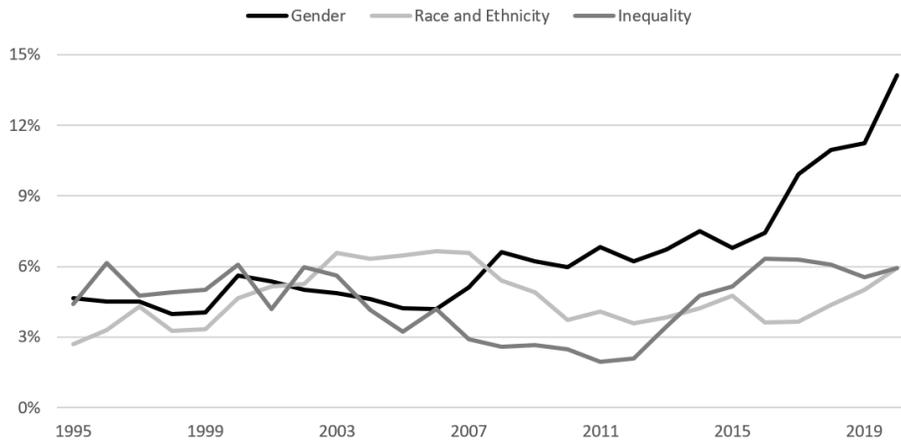


Figure 4 shows separately the conference papers on gender, on race and ethnicity, and on inequality. Conference papers on gender increased dramatically, from under 5 percent at the beginning of our time period to 14 percent in the most recent five years. Conference papers addressing race and ethnicity did increase over the entire period from under 3 percent in the first five years to almost 6 percent in recent years, though with a lot of variation (the early 2000s were just as high as recent years). One notable difference from the published peer-reviewed *AER*

papers is that conference papers addressing inequality have not seen as dramatic an increase over the period we studied: the five-year count increased from about 4.4 percent to almost 6 percent, with a lot of variation throughout the period we studied.

**Figure 4.** Conference papers published in the AEA Papers and Proceedings on gender, race and ethnicity, and inequality



Because the total number of conference papers selected annually for publication has increased over time, it is also useful to look at the raw numbers. For race and ethnicity, the first five years we examined had just 11 papers, while the most recent five years had 34 conference papers. For papers addressing inequality, the number of conference papers increased from 18 in the first five years to 34 in the most recent five years. Papers addressing gender issues saw a dramatic increase from 19 to 81 conference papers, again comparing the first and last five years in our period of study.

The annual conference proceedings include a paper based on the AEA Distinguished Lecture, which is presented at the conference. The lecture was very recently renamed, having been named through the 2020 conference for one of the racist progressive founders of the AEA, Richard T. Ely (Thies and Daza 2011). We did not include the Ely/Distinguished Lectures in our count of the AEA's conference papers, as it is distinct from a traditional conference paper, often summarizing or drawing on an individual's body of past research rather than presenting new research. But several of these lectures did address our three sets of issues, including Welch (1999) on inequality, Goldin (2006) on gender, Card (2009) on inequality, Currie (2011) on inequality, Poterba (2014) addressing inequality, though it was not the main topic, and Bertrand (2020) on gender.

## Discussion

Economists have clearly taken great interest in the topics of gender, race and ethnicity, and inequality. By the measures we have used in this paper, economists have in recent years increased their emphasis on these topics, especially gender and inequality. In recent years, one-tenth of the publications in the *American Economic Review* and one-fifth of the selected conference papers addressed gender, race and ethnicity, or inequality.

Our analysis provides some perspective on the claims that some economists have made about these issues being neglected by the economics profession. In the *Boston Review*, Marshall Steinbaum (2017) wrote about the reception of Thomas Piketty's work on inequality and stated that there is a "deafening silence that greets [Piketty's scholarship and interpretation], as well as inequality in general, in broad swathes of the field." Furthermore, Steinbaum asserted that some leading economics departments do not have "a single publication that has any obvious or even secondary bearing on" Piketty's work on inequality. Based on our research there have been 105 *AER* publications and 131 conference papers in the past three decades (and 84 publications and 106 conference papers through 2016, i.e., prior to Steinbaum's essay) addressing various aspects of inequality. There was also a full session at the 2015 AEA conference devoted to *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty 2014), and that session's papers were published in that year's conference proceedings.

In an article in *Newsweek* about racism in the economics profession, Dania Francis and Anna Gifty Opoku-Agyeman (2020) stated that "between 1990 and 2018, the five top journals in economics published 29 out of 7567 papers that explicitly addressed race/ethnicity," or less than one-half of one percent. But in our research, we found that the *AER* alone had 56 articles from 1991 to 2018 that addressed race or ethnicity. What accounts for the difference? Francis and Opoku-Agyeman used data from J. Aislinn Bohren et al. (2019), who looked specifically at *discrimination* regarding race and ethnicity (and other forms of discrimination, including gender), which may account for the smaller number of papers that Bohren et al. found—they were not looking for papers on the economics of race in general. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* by the reporter Amara Omeokwe (2020) used the same data and quoted economists saying that it was difficult to get research published on racial issues, but Omeokwe clearly stated that the data only covered racial discrimination, unlike Francis and Opoku-Agyeman (2020).

On the issue of gender, in an article for the *ProMarket* publication of the Stigler Center at the University of Chicago, Renée Adams (2019) provides the

information that from 1975 to 2009, “29 papers were published on the topic of women on boards in the 50 journals on the Financial Times (FT 50) list... All but one of these papers were published outside the field of economics.” The statement may well be true, but the general thrust of her Stigler Center article, including its title and subtitle, is that economists are devoting scarcely any space to research on gender issues. As we have shown in this paper, that is false: since 1991, a large and increasing share of space in the AEA and published AEA conference papers has been devoted to gender issues. Note that one AEA session published in the 2016 *Papers and Proceedings* was devoted to “Gender in Corporation Management,” including three papers that directly addressed the issue of gender diversity on corporate boards, one of which was co-authored by Adams (Adams and Kirchmaier 2016).

## Conclusion

The main findings of this study are that in recent years over 10 percent of papers in the *American Economic Review* and over 20 percent of papers in the published proceedings of the American Economic Association annual conference have been devoted to issues of gender, race and ethnicity, or inequality. These percentages have been increasing in recent years, especially for papers on gender issues.

## Appendix

A list of all the articles and papers included in our analyses is provided in a downloadable appendix ([link](#)).

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